

Probing question: Is the mid-life crisis a myth?

April 17 2008

Admit it — when you see a middle-aged man sliding behind the wheel of his sleek new convertible, you aren't thinking, "Wow, he must have gotten a nice raise." No, the phrase crossing your mind is "mid-life crisis."

The same syndrome takes the blame when a middle-aged person decides to have elective plastic surgery, has an illicit love affair, returns to college, or even rearranges the living room furniture.

If so many people are making life-changing decisions during their 40s and 50s, the mid-life crisis must be for real, right? Not necessarily, said David Almeida, professor of human development and family studies. "Research suggests the mid-life crisis is largely a myth," Almeida explained. "Very few people report having some definable crisis that's due to their age."

That's not to say that middle-aged people don't experience crises, but they tend to be brought on by a major life transition, not necessarily by age alone, said Almeida. "There are certainly things that happen in mid-life that are stressful," he added. "This is the time in life when you can develop chronic health problems, and you begin to lose loved ones, especially parents."

Almeida says the idea of the mid-life crisis likely began with followers of Freud who thought that during mid-life, people were driven by the fear of impending death. "Mid-life is a time when people start to

recognize that their time on earth is limited. They cope with this by clinging to youth in any way they can," he explained, "but Freudians thought there were intrapsychic things people could do to stave off impending death."

While there are certainly plenty of aging people looking to relive their youth, Almeida said his own research shows that people in mid-life are actually happier and more satisfied with their daily life than young people. "Typically by middle age, people have found their way in life," he said. "They know what job they're doing. Their kids are older. On average, mid-life is a happy time."

Mid-life crises often are defined by someone else's perception rather than our own, noted Almeida. "Many of the stereotypical hallmarks of a mid-life crisis, such as the sudden purchase of the expensive sports car, likely have more to do with middle-age financial status than with a search for youth," he said. "Middle age is generally when wealth begins to increase. Mid-life is often a time when people can literally afford some finer, more expensive pleasures."

Another reason we don't see many genuine mid-life crises, Almeida added, is because this also is a time of greater responsibilities. "I don't think people in mid-life have the time for a crisis," he said. "This is the time when we're responsible for our children and our aging parents. This is when people move into management positions and have additional responsibilities at work."

Almeida suggests that the concept of the mid-life crisis sometimes serves as a convenient excuse for certain behaviors that just happen to be taking place in middle age. "Dissatisfaction in marriage? Relationship problems? That's not mid-life crisis. That's someone behaving in a certain way, but it is easier to blame it on mid-life."

In general, he added, it is more useful for individuals to focus on day-to-day life challenges rather than ascribing them to an overall mid-life crisis situation.

And, said Almeida, if you want to buy that new convertible, go for it. You earned it.

Source: By Sue Marquette Poremba, Research Penn State

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